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SUBJECT: TURKEY: AKP FACING LOSSES, POSSIBLE EMBARRASSMENT IN SE  
MAYORAL CONTESTS

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SUMMARY

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[1](#)1. (SBU) Of the 22 provincial capitals in southeastern Turkey, AKP holds the mayoralty in 15 cities, the pro-Kurdish DTP runs five municipalities and the CHP and DP have one mayor each. While AKP candidates will do very well again this year, the party is likely to lose two-to-four seats and its vote total will decrease, thanks in part to competition for religious voters from the Saadet Party (SP) in conservative eastern Anatolia. The nationalist MHP and DTP look to be the main beneficiaries, each winning two cities, though the DTP's upside is as much as five. Adana is the big prize, because of its national stature and the gamble AKP took by not selecting its four-term incumbent to run again. End Summary.

[1](#)2. (U) We have been hearing about the March 29 municipal elections for the past year during our travels throughout the region and have been working the phones for the last few weeks. Moving east to west, this is our analysis of what to expect.

THE FAR EAST: AKP AND DTP BATTLEGROUND

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[1](#)3. (SBU) After Diyarbakir, Van is the biggest prize in the Kurdish region. The AKP incumbent mayor is vulnerable, both because of his lackluster performance and the growing popularity of Saadet, which could siphon off sufficient AKP votes to hand the race to the DTP. Our contacts all believe that DTP will win

the most votes, but many also believe AKP could resort to election fraud to hold the seat. Bitlis, Siirt, Mus and Bingol are among the most religiously conservative provinces in the country and should be safe bets for AKP to retain. Careless candidate selection by the AKP in Siirt and a surge by Saadet in Mus, however, could produce an upset or two by DTP. Hakkari, sandwiched between Iran and Iraq, looks safe for DTP.

#### THE SOUTHERN BORDER: SP AND DTP CHALLENGING AKP HEGEMONY

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14. (SBU) Mardin and Sanliurfa provinces are ethnically mixed (Kurdish and Arab) and religious, allowing the AKP to hold a comfortable lead over DTP in recent elections. In Sanliurfa, the AKP refused to renominate its incumbent mayor Ahmet Fakibaba, who is Saadet's candidate even though he is technically running as an independent. Our contacts believe Fakibaba's personal popularity, his honesty and record of good governance will propel him to victory, though the decrease in AKP votes will make this a three-way race, giving DTP an outside chance. The AKP is also struggling to hold Mardin because of growing support for DTP and the likelihood that a third party, the Democratic Party (DP), will siphon votes from AKP.

#### DIYARBAKIR AND BATMAN: KURDISH FORTRESSES

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15. (SBU) Although PM Erdogan targeted Diyarbakir as a top AKP priority, DTP incumbent Osman Baydemir appears on track for reelection. The AKP candidate Kutbettin Arzu lacks charisma, and Diyarbakir's influential intellectual community has been tepid towards the AKP's pro-Kurdish reforms. An AKP upset would trigger a major earthquake - potentially violent - in Kurdish politics. Batman, which has more religious voters and a strong AKP candidate, could be close but DTP is expected to hold on with Necdet Atalay, a young engineer and former DTP provincial chairman of Diyarbakir.

#### EASTERN ANATOLIA: ALEVIS AND STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

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16. (SBU) Isolated in the mountains, Tunceli is Turkey's sole Alevi-majority province - and one of the most famous cities in this election owing to the activities of the governor (legally above politics), who was caught distributing household appliances and sofas to families as part of a ploy to increase support for the AKP. Our contacts believe AKP has still failed to gain the Alevis' trust and DTP candidate Edibe Sahin, a 49-year-old mother of two and youth therapist is favored; however, CHP and an independent leftist could also do well. In Elazig, AKP backed the DP incumbent, who switched parties to secure victory. This sparked considerable animosity within party ranks, and just a week ago the press reported 1,600 AKP party members publically defected to SP. Intra-party fighting in Malatya has created even bigger problems for the AKP, which again jettisoned a popular incumbent. SP has nominated a former

MHP mayor, Yasar Cerci, who had a strong support base among Malatya's Alevi community representing about one-third of the voters. For staunchly pro-secular Alevis to support the SP is the ultimate in strange bedfellows. Adiyaman's popular and competent AKP mayor is a safe bet.

THE SYRIAN BORDER: AKP SAFEHAVENS

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¶7. (SBU) Gaziantep, Antakya and Kilis appear to be truly safe seats for AKP. Gaziantep has thrived thanks to booming exports to Iraq and Europe and its municipality has been well managed by the incumbent mayor, who is running again. Antakya has relatively large population of religious minorities - Orthodox and Catholics - as well as a high percentage of Muslim Arabs, all of whom have positive relations with the local AKP administration.

CUKUROVA: DIVIDED AKP FALLS

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¶8. (SBU) In the four cities of Mersin, Adana, Osmaniye and Kahramanmaraş, AKP currently holds three mayoralties, but it may lose all but one on March 29. Mersin's two-term CHP mayor, Macit Ozcan, is cruising to re-election thanks to an uncharacteristically efficient party machine and weak opposition. In Adana (reftels), AKP hubris led the party to oust four-term incumbent Aytac Durak, who has found a new home with MHP. PM Erdogan is rumored to be planning a second campaign visit to Adana to try to defeat Durak, who is wobbly but still standing. Osmaniye is the hometown of MHP Chairman Devlet Bahçeli, who is intent on winning the city from AKP,

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which has again dumped its incumbent and largely successful mayor, reportedly due to intra-party feuding. In Kahramanmaraş, the AKP received 81% of the vote in the 2007 elections and while the AKP mayor cannot equal that record, he is set to win comfortably.

CONCLUSION: PINPRICKS IN THE ARMOR

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¶9. (SBU) Of the 22 provinces in Adana's district, the DTP and MHP are each poised to pick up two mayoralties at the AKP's expense and another should go to the SP-supported Fakibaba in Sanliurfa. AKP is expected to gain one seat in Elazig. In the worst-case scenario, AKP's losses could be as high as eight, leaving the AKP in control of only 8 cities. In the Kurdish regions, the rough equality between the DTP and AKP may shift slightly towards the DTP, but only because of SP's ability to poach AKP votes.

¶10. (SBU) Some of AKP's problems in southeastern Turkey are undoubtedly due to the faltering economy and the inevitable malaise that afflicts any ruling party that has been in office more than six years. But many of the wounds in the election races analyzed here are self-inflicted. Candidate selection, particularly in Van, Siirt, Sanliurfa and Adana, has put AKP in

a much weaker position in numerous cities, forcing the party to pour resources into areas that should have been easier to defend. While AKP can attribute losses east of the Euphrates to ethnic and tribal voting (with some cause), an AKP defeat in Adana would be a major setback: since 2002, through skill, luck and incompetent opposition, the AKP has avoided major electoral blunders. But if the wily 70-year-old Adana mayor Durak outmaneuvers PM Erdogan, others may conclude the AKP leader's brilliant career is beyond its apex.

GREEN